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SUBJECT: THIS WEEK IN ALBANIA, NOVEMBER 17-23, 2007

11. (U) The following is a weekly report prepared by Embassy Tirana's local staff to provide political and economic context and insight into developments in Albania. These updates will supplement post's DAR reports and reporting cables.

POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENTS  
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12. (U) Praise from Tirana for Kosovo Elections: Kosovo's November 17 elections were closely followed in Tirana with live media coverage from Pristina. Albanian leaders including President Topi, Prime Minister Berisha and Opposition Leader Rama praised the outcome as proof of the irreversible progress of democratization and a testimony to Kosovo's readiness for self-governance. The calm and successful elections are considered an important contribution to regional stability. Tirana's politicians all called on the PDK leader Hashim Thaci to quickly form the new government and institutions.

13. (U) Changes Afoot in Judicial Institutions: The Council of Justice (CoJ) elected Kreshnik Spahiu as its new Deputy Chairman, replacing Ilir Panda whose mandate expired this month. A judge by training, Spahiu has spent his career supporting public action against corruption and the fight against civic apathy. A new Prosecutor General (PG) was also appointed, Ina Rama, who served in 2007 as an embassy-nominated expert on a series of trainings for judges sponsored by the U.S. Department of Justice and PAMECA. She has been a judge on the Court of Appeals for Serious Crimes since 2005 and is known for her high level of professionalism.

14. (U) The CoJ is the oversight body for the Ministry of Justice, comprised of judges and legal experts. In recent years, the CoJ has been accused by the Prime Minister of impeding progress on the fight against corruption, as has the Office of the PG. With the replacement of the Deputy Chairman and four other members (whose mandates expire at year's end), the composition of the body is expected to change significantly. This, along with the newly appointed PG, should enhance the GOA's influence over the judiciary and ability to implement its reform agenda.

15. (U) OIC Membership Projects a Controversial Image: At an informal gathering of some of Albania's leading political analysts, several expressed continued reservations over the country's OIC membership arguing Albania has little to gain from such an alliance. It was noted that although OIC support is occasionally helpful, for example on a possible UN resolution on Kosovo, such opportunities are few and do not outweigh what is perceived as a negative image of Albania as an Islamic country, permanently "tarnishing" its image.

16. (U) Underscoring national pride for Albania's long history of religious tolerance, analysts emphasized that their government is strongly secular and that Albanian citizens are generally indifferent toward religious beliefs. They expressed concern that a growing influence of young Muslims educated by strict Islamic schools abroad could impact Albanian's acclaimed moderation on religion.

¶17. (U) A Slice of Italy in Albania: "Casa Italia" opened last week, a new shopping center bringing Italian brands and products to Tirana. This is the second major shopping mall to open, following on the success of the "Center of the Shopping Universe" (QTU). QTU has been retail trade success story, with three million visitors in 2006 alone, and plans for future expansion. A third, CITY Center, is expected to open in fall 2008, reportedly to include a movie theater. The success of these western-style malls underscores the strong increase in economic activity, progress in the formalization of the market, and the continually improving quality of life in Tirana.

¶18. (U) Quote of the Week: From Erjon Veliaj, former head of Mjaft Movement (and outspoken critic of the majority coalition) announcing his intention to form a new political action group:  
"What can I say, even Bart Simpson would govern better than Prime Minister Berisha."

¶19. (U) Person of the Week: Stan Dragoti is an Albanian-American film producer who has contributed such teen classics as She's Out of Control (1989) and Love at First Bite (1979). He met with PM Berisha last week to discuss a new strategy to promote Albania's image internationally. Dragoti's commercial successes also include Mr. Mom (1983) and The Man with One Red Shoe (1985). He was born in New York to Albanian parents and was married for nine years to the 1970's model and actress Cheryl Tiegs.

¶10. (U) The Week Ahead: Albania will celebrate its Independence Day next week. On November 28, 1912, the Albanian patriot Ismail Qemali proclaimed independence in the southern town of Vlora and created the first Albanian government following 500 years of Ottoman rule. Albania's independence was recognized by the Great Powers in the London Conference of 1913.

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